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CHANGING FUNCTIONS OF THE HUANANCHA DANCE AT THE CORPUS CHRISTI FESTIVAL IN PARACHO, MICHOACÁN, MEXICO*

By BERNICE A. KAPLAN

178 [167] ONE MIGHT EXPECT in a community which, in recent decades, has seen a great deal of labor migration and the return of these migrants to their native town, that many of the local traditions and folkways would be discarded as more modern ways were adopted. One discovers, however, in getting beneath the surface of the everyday round of affairs that easily meet the eye, that many of the older customs and beliefs are adhered to with great tenacity. It often appears that the actual place of these practices in the structure and functioning of the community is not completely understood by the participants and residents. For example, in the town of Paracho the 533 *Canaquas*, the traditional songs of praise rendered in the native idiom, are 191 often sung for visiting dignitaries. Nonetheless the girls who sing these *Cana-* *quas* do not themselves speak Tarascan, nor do they know what they are singing 186 about. The singers must learn the correct ordering of the syllables by rote from 554 an older woman whose parents spoke the language. Despite this, it is believed that this is the proper way of doing things, and that to do otherwise would mean to lose continuity with the past more rapidly than the inhabitants wish. That the visiting dignitary usually doesn't understand the songs either, is of no concern. Through the singing of the *Canaquas* and the performance of special dances the residents indicate that they are a people with a past and with traditions that are still living, and the visitor in the face of this performance must concur that these, indeed, are a "people."

178 Native dances and *Canaquas*, however, are not everyday affairs. Their per- 533 formance is limited to times of fiesta: the dances, because they are traditionally 535 performed at these times; the *Canaquas*, because the visiting dignitaries most 796 often make their appearance at such festivities. Inasmuch as the transmission of cultural sanctions from one generation to another is often to be found in dance and music one may expect to find in such performances, when they are associated with particular periodic occasions, remnants of a past which may be difficult to trace in the daily activities of the people. These relics provide, 178 however, a dynamic link with the past which, even if not wholly functional in 796 the everyday life of the people, gives them a framework around which to orient

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178 their more mundane activities. It was therefore with the expectation of a re-
796 warding experience that the annual Corpus Christi fiesta was awaited in the
[114] pueblo of Paracho where the author was engaged in anthropological studies during the summer of 1948.

Paracho is a mestizo community of approximately three thousand persons.
131 It is located in the Sierra Region of Michoacán, in the heart of the Tarascan area. The pueblo is approximately half-way between Carapan and Uruapan on the branch of the national highway that connects those towns and is about fifteen miles from each. Although the community is rapidly becoming urban-
178 ized it still adheres to many of the old customs—to a diminishing extent, to be sure, as new ways come to supplant them. The performance of the Huanancha dance at the festival of Corpus Christi is one such "survival," but apparently it is coming to have a function somewhat altered from that which it had in early Colonial days.

796 The church calendar notwithstanding, the fiesta of Corpus Christi is cele-
443 brated at different times in the several pueblos of the Sierra Region of Michoacán. This is primarily because a large and continuous market is a cardinal requirement for a successful holiday, and the travelling salesmen, operators of merry-go-rounds, gamblers, clowns, and other personages who help to make the market place a center of attraction for a wide area, cannot be in several places at the same time. In Paracho, Corpus Christi is celebrated on the second Sunday in August and continues for two days. For the community the holiday has three main functions: commercial, religious and recreational. In 1948, the year in which the fiesta in Paracho was observed by the author, the religious aspect appears to have been subordinate. One villager said that no special church ceremonies were held in Paracho that year because the Bishop of
[793] Zamorra and the priest had decided that "it was not good for the people because they don't know how to have a nice holiday and they get drunk." The clerics were also reported to have said, "if the people can have a nice holiday then they can have the church ceremonies (on that day) again." There had been special observances on Corpus Christi in 1947, the first year that the present parish priest was in residence.

178 But it was not only the religious significance of the holiday that was changing
533 in the minds and activities of the people. Other practices associated with the
796 holiday in the past are also receiving less attention than formerly. For example, each trade group—an organization of members who work at the same specialized trade, of which twenty-one are recognized in Paracho—used to hire a
[467] "music" (that is, either a band or an orchestra) which followed the group about the town for the two and a half days of the holiday, playing almost all of the time. Each group would vie with the others to get the best "music" and to have their musicians play the longest and the loudest. In 1948 only five of the trade groups hired either bands or orchestras, and a sixth band was provided
178 by the mayor of the town. We were also told that formerly it was the practice
467 of each trade group to set itself up in the plaza on the second day of the holiday
796 and demonstrate for all to see how they worked—making miniature chocolate

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beaters, *rebosos* or shawls, ponchos, small loaves of bread, and so forth, and giving these away to the bystanders.[1] This custom was not observed in 1948, although we were told that it had been carried on only the year before. Various reasons were given for these lapses. Some said that the people were tired of the old ways and did not want to bother. One possible explanation may rest on the fact that the priest had a large building program under way and the pueblo's new church was about half finished. It may be that the priest did not wish to divert money from his building program by allowing his parishoners to spend it on lavish holiday expenditures. It would seem likely that there would be less money for the church building program if the fiesta were elaborate, but the opposite argument is also plausible. As evidence of this we were told, a month before the fiesta, that the celebration would, "be like in the old times because they (i.e. the church officials) want to raise a lot of money for the church, and they are sure that if they don't have a good 'Corpus' like in the old days then they won't be able to make much money." This person indicated that it was unlikely that anyone would be very generous if he did not have a good time. Nonetheless, the other view evidently prevailed—at least in outward behavior.

As the time for the fiesta approached, many members of the community "played down" the holiday, perhaps to make the event, when it actually took place, seem that much better. It was also repeatedly said that the political upheaval which occurred a few weeks prior to the holiday—the duly elected mayor was ousted from office by the defeated candidate—had divided the town. The result of this was that several of the trade groups chose not to cooperate in "making" the holiday. Despite both the prior maximizing and minimizing of the approaching fiesta, there was plenty of noise and good fun during the holiday.

It was the mayor's band, a group of from fifteen to eighteen brass and woodwind players who were brought to Paracho especially for the occasion as the mayor's contribution to the fiesta, that provided the music for the Huanancha dances. These musicians came by bus from the pueblo of Ichan, one of the so-called "eleven pueblos" on the Morelia-Guadalajara highway, a distance of some eighteen miles from Paracho. It may be possible to infer from the prior anxiety about the success of the holiday, and from the fact that the dancers were asked to participate only three days before the holiday, that the mayor himself feared he would lose status if the fiesta were not at least in some ways as in the old days. This may be the reason that the presentation of the dance was continued, as one means of keeping the good will of the townspeople. This is purely in the realm of conjecture, however.

The dance of the Huanancha maidens is one of the two special dances performed traditionally in Paracho. It is performed on Corpus Christi, on the day

[1] René Barragán y Luis Arturo González Bonilla, "Vida Actual de los Tarascos," in Lucio Mendieta y Nuñez (ed.), *Los Tarascos: Monográfia histórica, etnográfica, y económica* (Mexico, 1940), p. 146. In 1940 the miniature objects were made and then were sold on the following day. "It is said that formerly they did not sell, but that they took them to the church and later threw them away." (Translated from the Spanish).

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535 of Santa Ursula (October 21st), and whenever there is a fiesta for the Virgin.
796 We were told that the dance is reputed to be of pre-Columbian origin. According to Nicolás León, however, this is not the case. He says, in part, ". . . The
175 institution of the Guananchas dates from the period in which the illustrious Sr. Quiroga founded the pueblo hospital of Santa Fe de la Laguna in Michoa-
535 cán . . ." León goes on to say,

796 The name *guananchecha* signifies to carry, or he who carries something, and is derived from the (Tarascan) verb *Huani*. The office which is performed by those who carry this name justifies the etymology, for they are the women who carry on their shoulders the image of the most saintly Virgin in the processions which occur every Saturday.[2]

León also quotes from the chronicles of the Reverendo padre Fray Alonso La Rea who, writing in the late 16th Century, refers to the Guananchas in Uruapan. La Rea writes as follows:

I have instructed that a procession to the Virgin of the Conception be made on Saturdays, the image to be carried on the shoulders of four of the most important Indian women, with their garlands and crowns, to the principal church. (These women receive the name of Guananchecha in Tarascan.) At the church the solemn mass is sung, I decorate the church with much sedge and flowers, as if every Saturday were the named fiesta. After the mass the Virgin is returned to the hospital in the same manner.[3]

In the *Pindecuario* of the Parish of San Francisco de Pichátaro, published in 1731, there is reference to the office of *uananchatiecha*, the women carriers of the Virgin. These women in association with other officers of the "Hospital" of this community carried the image of the Virgin about on Saturdays and Mondays. There was, apparently, a feast associated with the Saturday processions for foods of various sorts were required to be brought to the "Hospital."[4]

535 In Paracho the performers are young girls, approximately from seven to
554 twelve years of age. In earlier days in Paracho, and apparently in several other Tarascan pueblos even today, the Huananchas or Huananchichas had the year-round task of caring for the pueblo's image of the Virgin and of carrying this image in processions. Today, in Paracho at least, all that remains of the earlier practice is the performance of the dance. About three days before the holiday in 1948 the parents of the seven girls who had been nominated to take part in the dance were approached by a committee of men to ask their permission. Certain expenses, such as the purchase of special dresses and flowers for the crown and possibly for refreshments, are incumbent upon the performers and their families, and conceivably some parents might wish to turn down the offer. It is not possible to say with certainty whether status in the community had anything to do with the selection of the dancers. One of those

[2] Nicolás León, "Los Tarascos, Notas Históricas, Étnicas y Antropológicas," *Boletín del Museo Nacional de Mexico*, 2a epoca, T. I, Mexico, 1906, p. 331, footnote 33, (translated from the Spanish).

[3] *Op. cit.*, *Anales del Museo Nacional*, 2a epoca, T.III, 1906, p. 307, (translated from the Spanish).

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 422.

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chosen was born in another community and another was technically illegitimate—since her parents, although living together for many years, had never been wed either in civil or religious ceremony. The Huananchas came from all quarters of the pueblo. Participation itself, through enabling one to be among those directly concerned with "making the holiday," may well have been a means of acquiring prestige in the community. The Huananchas *may* have been chosen in the same manner as were the *Cargueros* (the officers of the trade groups) in the past. That is, a committee decided who should participate and then notified those nominated; these people might then beg off if they had good arguments. This was the procedure outlined for naming the *Cargueros* who were then responsible for organizing the various trade groups in past years, however no specific comments were made about the manner of choice of the Huananchas.

In the dance all of the little girls wore pink satin or sateen dresses. These apparently were made for the occasion. On their heads they wore gilded crowns with brightly colored artificial flowers attached. The elegance of each dancer's dress and the number of sprays of flowers on her crown were subjects of much comparison, both by the dancers themselves and by their mothers. It was observed that one of the dancers was visibly distressed over some unkindly comments about her hair which was not curled like that of the others, and because her crown bore fewer flowers. There is thus an informal, but effective, status ranking of the dancers and their families in terms of the costumes worn.

In the dance the four biggest girls—representing those who formerly used to carry the image of the Virgin—form a rectangle. Between them are the three shorter and younger girls. (See "a," Fig. 1). We were told that the center dancer of these last three represents the pennant bearer and is supposed to carry a blue pennant. She is known as *Pendonpasi*. One of the others was supposed to carry copal or incense, and the third one a candle. Actually, the dancers carried nothing when they performed in 1948. It is probable that the description given really refers to what the Huananchas used to carry in processions, and not what they held in their hands during the dance.

The only step for the entire dance is an extremely slow and, to the outsider, monotonous "simple" but the patterns which the dancers perform vary.[8] When dancing in the town hall for the various political and other officials the performance continued for approximately 45 minutes; at other times the dance was limited to about 20 minutes by elimination of the repetition of the various patterns. In the town hall and elsewhere the girls were surrounded on all sides by observers during their performance. In the description which follows, "front" refers to the two dancers closest to the officials, "back," to the two dancers farthest from the guests of honor. The three other dancers form a center row. All dancers face the guests of honor most of the time.

The dance begins with all seven girls making two very slow turns in place in

[8] René Barragán y Luis Arturo González Bonilla, *op. cit.*, p. 174. Here the authors have the following to say about a religious dance which they observed in the Internado in Paracho: "The dances are very prolonged and they always last several hours, accompanied by a terribly monotonous music." (Translated from the Spanish).

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535 a clockwise direction (see "a," Fig. 1). The tempo and nature of the music then change and the dancer in the center (the *pendonpasi*) makes a half turn to the left and dances around each of the two back Huananchichas, then circles each of the remaining two dancers in the center row, first one and then the other. Next the front Huananchichas are circled and the *pendonpasi* returns to the center and turns once to the right in place (see "b," Fig. 1). Now the two back Huananchas move forward. The one on the left crosses the one on the right behind the *pendonpasi* and continues to circle first the dancer to the right of the *pendonpasi* in the same row and then the Huananchicha in the left front. After this she returns to her place in the back left corner. Her partner in the meantime is circling the dancer to the left of the *pendonpasi* in the same row and then the right front Huanancha and is returning to her place in the back right corner (see "c," Fig. 1). Next, the two Huananchichas in the front proceed in approximately the same fashion, except that instead of circling the two rear Huananchas they skirt them without completing the circle (see "d," Fig. 1). When they have returned to their places, the remaining two center dancers start to do their "turns." These involve circling first the front Huanancha opposite their standing position and then the back Huanancha who is standing on the diagonal from this, and finally returning to their starting places (see "e," Fig. 1). When this is completed all dancers take a half turn in place clockwise and return to starting position counterclockwise (see "f," Fig. 1), then the three center dancers step close together, the rear Huananchichas come up beside them (see "g," Fig. 1) and together they march slowly forward between the two front Huananchichas, bringing all into one straight line (see "h," Fig. 1). At this point the girls are given a large bowl full of confetti and small hard candies which they throw to the assembled guests of honor who are at the front of the dance area.

The dance is supposed to be performed twice in public, once at the church or in the street in front of the church, and once for the mayor of the town and such visiting dignitaries as may be invited to observe the performance in the mayor's office. In 1948 no performance of the dance took place in the street; the priest came to the mayor's office to watch the dancing there. Following this the girls, sometimes their mothers and always a group of older women in whose charge the dancers are, go to call on the important merchants and dance for them. After this, the dance is performed at the home of each of the dancers. The neighbors all crowd into the patio to watch. There is no set time for arriving on these rounds, so no special preparations can be made. One simply hears the music coming down one's street, and if interested follows it to its destination. If you happen to have one of the dancers in your own family the assumption is that the group will come to your patio eventually. The older women who escort the dancers were, in the past, the organizers of the fiesta, and during the year they used to help to keep the church in good order and decorated. These women also used to operate a "hospital" (after the models first established by Don Vasco de Quiroga in the 16th century) near the church. Supposedly their presence with the dancers is to serve as chaperones for them, although some of the residents were heard to comment that the opposite may

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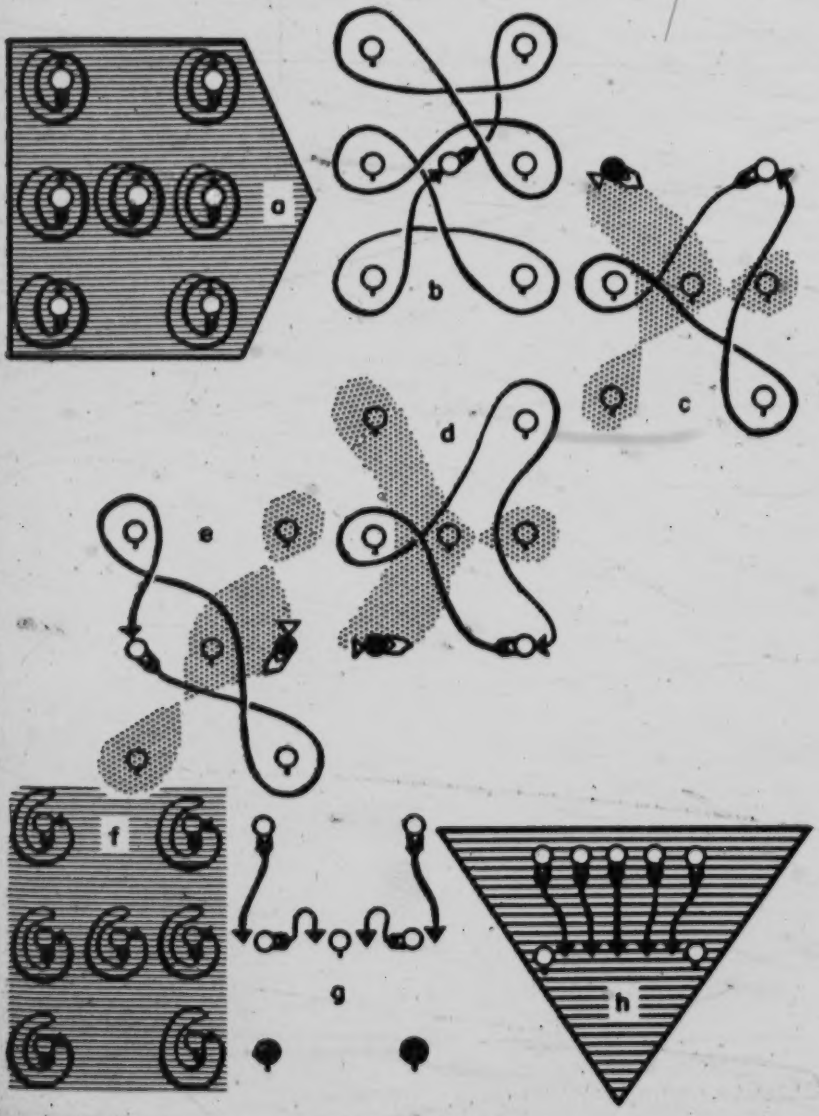

FIG. 1: Huanancha Dance.

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well have been true—for after two days of dancing the little girls were, in some cases, the only ones who remained sober. The reason for this is that following each performance of the dance in a private home the family honored by the performance is expected to offer refreshments, usually alcoholic in nature, for the musicians and the women who accompany the dancers.

Before the fiesta began, one villager said, "We like this Huanancha music because it is very slow and quiet and because it is our music and we know it." He also commented with evident approval on the fact that the dance is very, very slow. After the girls had performed and the holiday was over the same man said that he didn't like the music of the Huananchas now as much as he used to because they dance too fast and to music which is that used for the dance of the Moors.[6] He went on to say that the music of today is not as it used to be, because the music for the Huanancha and the Moor dances is not supposed to be the same, but now it is. It may be mentioned that this comment came from the clarinet player, the sometimes conductor of the Paracho orchestra, who took pride in the local music. On another occasion another member of the community said that the townspeople always used to have music for the funeral processions, but that this custom had been abandoned in recent times because the music was too slow and sad and made all of the people feel bad.

While on the subject of Tarascan music it is interesting to note that Carl Lumholtz who visited Paracho and other Tarascan communities in 1895, said about the Tarascan music that its "dominant character . . . is sad and plaintive. To a scherzo or a rondo these people would remain absolutely indifferent."[7]

Not all of the people questioned about the music and the dance shared the clarinet player's view either on the music, which he disliked, or on the dance, which he liked. Some of the townspeople made no effort to get to see any of the performances at all and had no desire to see them. One woman, who had spent several years in the United States, said that she didn't like the dance but that it was customary to have it. She didn't mind if others wanted to see it, but she herself didn't wish to bother. Another individual complained that he did not like the dance because it was too slow. Even the musician reluctantly admitted that "they don't do these dances here any more." He added, "Only one old lady in town knows the dances of the Huananchichas and if they are going to dance them then she teaches them, but if not, she doesn't want to bother. She says, 'there is no use'."

There are communities other than Paracho which have Huananchas and Huanancha dances. Migrants to Paracho from Charapan said that a similar dance was formerly, and perhaps still is, performed in that pueblo; some said it is called by another name there. The Huanancha dance was performed by residents in Cheranastico, a pueblo about five miles from Paracho, one week after the Corpus Christi fiesta in Paracho. Beals reports the presence of

[6] Seen by the author at the nearby pueblo of Nauhautzen on August 25, 1948, and described by Ralph Beals, *Cheran: A Sierra Tarascan Village*. Institute of Social Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution, Publication Number 2, Washington, D. C., 1946, p. 144.

[7] Carl Lumholtz, *Unknown Mexico* (New York, 1903), II, 388.

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Huananchas in Cheran.[8] There the girls were chosen either on the basis of a vow made by their parents, or else they were nominated by the *prioste*, the woman in charge of certain of the ceremonial round of affairs. In Cheran, the function of the girls was definitely of a religious nature since they were expected to clean the church periodically, to bring flowers to decorate the church and to perform other such duties. Although the dance in which these girls participate, known as a Pastorela, does not parallel that of the Paracho Huananchas, their present functions seem to match very closely what were reported to have been the functions of the Paracho Huananchas until recently.

In 1906 León apparently observed the functioning of the *guananchas* in Arentepácua for he writes:

> On December 8th they celebrated the Fiesta de La Purisima with feather dances, fireworks, and a procession in the Hospital, from which the *guananchas* come to outshine themselves. These are the young maidens of the pueblo, into whose charge is put the care of decorating the altar of the Virgin, and more than that they have the duty of carrying the image on a litter during the procession. For this duty they put on their best dresses and crown their head with a garland of natural flowers. In this fiesta they are present at the church all day, where they remain singing praises to the Virgin in Tarascan.[9]

Beals also reports that prior to 1932 there were in the mestizo town of Chilchota four specially appointed women known as Roseras or Huananchitas whose duties included care of the Virgin, dressing of the image on special occasions, and the floral decoration of the litter on which the image was carried.[10] They were also expected to walk in the religious procession. In these processions one of the Roseras carried a spray of flowers while another carried a pennant. In Chilchota, in contrast to the custom in other pueblos where the office of Huananchicha is mentioned, the Roseras or Huananchichas are older, married women. Although the office of Huananchicha is present in Chilchota there appears to be no religious dancing associated with it in which the office holders themselves participate.

In this same study Beals reports that in Paracho on August 12, 1940, he observed a dance of little girls in the streets and in the mayor's office. In 1940 the church was elaborately decorated with flowers, vegetables and fruit. Saint's images were placed at the four corners of the atrium, and following the noon mass a procession moved counterclockwise about the atrium stopping before each saint's image. At that time, according to Beals, the dancers formed part of the procession.[11] In 1948 there was no religious procession. On the other hand, the Huananchichas and their "music" did lead the parade of the bulls to the bull ring on the first day of the spectacle.

From the foregoing it may be seen that the office of the Huanancha maidens is not one limited to the pueblo of Paracho, but that in Paracho—at least by

[8] Ralph Beals, *op. cit.*, pp. 148–149.
[9] Nicolás León, *op. cit.*, *Anales del Museo Nacional*, 2a epoca, T. III, p. 468, (translated from the Spanish).
[10] Ralph Beals, *op. cit.*, pp. 215–219.
[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 130–131.

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178 535 1948—some of the earlier functions of the office had disappeared and little save the outer formality of the performance of the dance remained. The fact that the performance has not yet been entirely eliminated indicates that the dance still holds meaning for at least some of the members of the community. It may do no more than give status and prestige to the families of the girls who take part. Yet if this is so, it is of some interest that this method of gaining position in the community continues to be recognized and approved. On the other hand, it seems plausible to explain the survival of the dance of the Huananchichas as a loose bond between the earlier sacred beliefs, practices and orientations of the community and the newer, more secular, emphases which are continually gaining ground. For the majority of the younger members of the audience it may well have been that the performance of the dance held no very deep emotional significance, that it was merely another spectacle of the Corpus Christi fiesta. Many of the older people, on the other hand, seemed to derive genuine satisfaction from its performance, if only because it reminded them of the past.

Detroit, Michigan

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